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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABIDJAN 000492

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SUBJECT: PARTIES IN FN-HELD TERRITORIES ORIENTED AROUND
ETHNICITY

REF: ABIDJAN 459

Classified By: EconChief EMassinga, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. Summary. DCM, Econ Chief and Political Specialist traveled July 15-18 to Seguela and Bouake in Forces Nouvelles-held territory. During the course of the trip, Emboffs met with representatives of the country's three major political parties (FPI, RDR, PDCI). Discussions with party representatives demonstrated the degree to which the presidential election scheduled for November 30 will swing on questions of ethnicity, vice ideological platforms. The RDR is focused on resisting efforts by the President's faction to disenfranchise northern voters while attempting to deflect characterization of its leader, Alassane Ouattara, as a "northern" candidate. The PDCI is hunkering down to protect the interests of the Baoule people in the Bouake region. The FPI for its part is attempting to nibble into the PDCI's Baoule stronghold and aims for modest gains elsewhere for its core constituency. Visit followed on the heels of President Gbagbo's first visit to Seguela since the outbreak of hostilities in 2002. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During a recent visit to Forces Nouvelles-controlled Bouake and Seguela to assess recent internecine fighting within the group's armed wing, Emboffs met with representatives of the three main political parties: the President's FPI party, former President Bedie's PDCI party, and former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara's RDR party. While party representatives presented their regional electoral strategies and platforms, in every meeting, the representatives betrayed a heavy ethnic bias in their electoral orientation.

RDR

¶3. (C) The RDR representatives focused intently on the question of identification, particularly the President's July 14 proposal, made in his trip to Seguela, to distribute identification cards after the upcoming presidential election. Echoing the critique of the President's identification trial balloon leveled by the Forces Nouvelles (septel), the Bouake representative said he had "waited 10 years to achieve this objective (identification), and will not be denied at this point" and that his militants would be very upset if the Forces Nouvelles caved after more than six years of struggle for political equality and enfranchisement among Cote d'Ivoire's ethnic groups.

¶4. (C) The RDR representative in Seguela, who is the Mayor of the city, organized a meeting with party stalwarts, including leaders of the youth and women's wings, along with representatives of agricultural producers and teachers. Universally, party leaders and rank and file expressed similar anxieties to those expressed by their Bouake counterpart regarding identification and security of the upcoming elections, openly fearing attempts by the FPI to manipulate the vote using the armed forces and gendarmerie.

15. (C) The RDR's Bouake representative said the wife of the party leader was scheduled to visit the North during the week of August 4, but that party leader Alassane Ouattara himself would not come at his militants' request. The representative averred that if Ouattara is to mount a genuine national campaign, he needs to avoid the appearance of being a "northern candidate." While admitting that in the mostly Baoule villages around Bouake, there is still a strong sense that Ouattara is a "foreigner," the RDR representative said that the RDR maintains a strong edge in Bouake proper. A study done by the party showed that of the 30,000 RDR sympathizers in the region who wanted and needed identification papers, 15,000 obtained documentation ("jugements suppletifs") in the audiences foraines process, a result he intimated is roughly the experience throughout Forces Nouvelles territory.

FPI

16. (C) The FPI's operatives in Bouake were a sharp, capable group. Meeting Emboffs in a Catholic school, they recounted how they had fled the region and only returned in the wake of the Flame of Peace ceremony held in Bouake on June 30, 2007. Heartened by the return of state administration, the FPI reported steering clear of security issues altogether in Forces Nouvelles-held territory. They claim 11,653 militants in the Bouake region, compared to 6,000 before the outbreak of hostilities in 2002, and report carrying out an intensive door-to-door campaign, eschewing mass rallies as the primary means to turn out the vote. The FPI sees an opportunity in Bouake: before the crisis, the region was a PDCI stronghold, but now they claim that village chiefs and even FAFN soldiers

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are becoming FPI militants.

17. (C) In Seguela, the FPI is happy with the President's recent July 14 visit, but remains visibly traumatized, claiming that in the 2002 hostilities they were targeted "a la Rwanda" by those they identify as "RDR stalwarts" and that FPI militants (presumably Bete and other southern ethnic groups) were scattered, they and their offices attacked, and some even killed. An FPI representative vividly recalled the 2000 "betrayal" by the PDCI administration of the city when the RDR-aligned gendarmerie prevented them from voting in the presidential election, causing, in their view, the FPI's loss in the region.

18. (C) The FPI in the Seguela region today has the modest goal of gaining control of the general council of the surrounding region (vice the mayoralty of the city proper), admitting the RDR's dominance among "Ouattara supporters" whom they described as "all foreigners, Guineans, Malians and Burkinabe." Both in Bouake and Seguela, the FPI stalwarts rely on the party's rhetoric of 2000 - free schooling, empowerment of women, universal health care, administrative decentralization, and ending local winner-take-all politics, and are now adding the promise to clean up corruption at the national level, pointing to recent arrests in the cocoa sector as proof of the President's determination.

PDCI

19. (C) In Bouake, party representatives noted many militants have not yet returned due to the security situation. They complained bitterly about the failure to receive compensation for houses seized by the FN. They noted that while an FN-led committee is gradually sorting out who owns what homes in Bouake and is removing squatters who have taken over homes during the six years of FN administration, actual payments for damages is not forthcoming. PDCI representatives see this failure as a substantial barrier to their militants' return to the region.

10. (C) The key Bouake representative complained about corruption in the FPI government, and expressed the fear that

local people (i.e. Baoule) will be menaced by "foreigners" during elections without a strong United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI) security presence. Claiming to be the historically dominant party in the Bouake region, he claimed "tens of thousands of activists," and said PDCI strength is in the countryside. While he described the PDCI as "the party of the producer" and noted that it "understands capitalism," his counterpart in Seguela admitted that ideologically, not much separates the three major parties.

¶11. (C) Comment. Ethnicity has historically played a central role in Ivoirian politics. Discussions with interlocutors from the major political parties in the Forces Nouvelles-controlled northern part of the country reveal that this has not changed. To the contrary, these interlocutors admitted, knowingly or not, that electoral strategy turns tightly on ethnic prejudices. The sole attempt to cross ethnic lines appears to be the FPI strategy to woo rural Baoule in the Bouake region, echoing its attempts throughout the PDCI heartland to peel off enough voters to position the President as the logical Baoule alternative to a "foreign" president (i.e., RDR President Alassane Ouattara). Ouattara's ultra-low profile in his northern base (he has not visited the north since 2006) seems to be a calculated move to try to take ethnicity, long his Achilles heel, off the table. Overall, it appears that ethnic identification will play a dominate role in the upcoming presidential election. End Comment.
AKUETTEH